



Talking with kids about

DRUGS





DRUGS

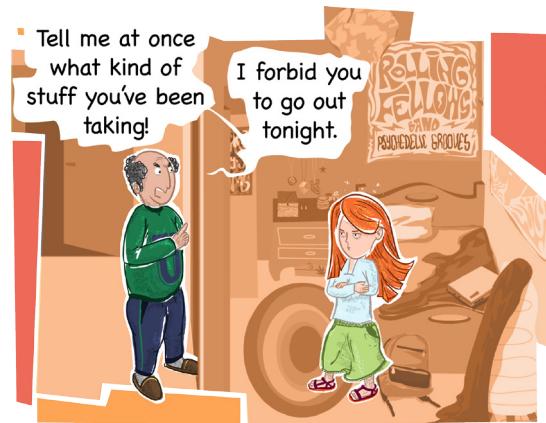
One of the most important responsibilities of growing up is maturing into an independent free person. This is not easy for teenagers and can lead to many conflicting situations. After all, as parents you have been the main reference persons in the life of your teenagers who are now beginning to assert and distance themselves. Rules and boundaries must be renegotiated and implemented. This example deals with the attitude to drugs. This issue provides numerous possibilities of going around parental rules and simply go try it for yourself. At the same time, the topic affords you the opportunity to communicate a clear position and to express your own attitudes. This action is part of the basic competence of a democratic citizen. However, in a direct discussion with your children it is probably best to try it with I-messages. In this document you will learn how to form and use I-Messages correctly (If you are curious, have a look at [page 6](#)).

Your daughter Sofia returns home, staggering and unsteady, following a birthday party at a girlfriend's house. The 15-year old reeks of alcohol and you believe to detect a faint smell of cannabis as well.

How would you react? Choose one of the options provided and go on reading on the indicated page:



Go to [page 3!](#)



Go to [page 4!](#)



Go to [page 5!](#)

If you observe the following warning signs, you should be vigilant and try to engage your teenagers in conversation:

- Your children are suddenly doing poorly in school.
- Their sleeping rhythm is changing substantially.
- Your children withdraw and avoid you.
- Your children change friends or lose contact with them entirely.
- They show a lack of interest in their hobbies.
- Your children have unusually strong emotional fluctuations and little or no desire for anything.
- Your children spend more money than usual.

These changes could also be part of a normal development during puberty. Therefore, it is best not to panic, but to remain engaged in conversations to find out more about the reasons behind these changes.

For more information:

<https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/addiction/tc/teen-alcohol-and-drug-abuse-topic-overview#1>

<https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/principles-adolescent-substance-use-disorder-treatment-research-based-guide/principles-adolescent-substance-use-disorder-treatment>



It is advisable to begin a conversation in a quiet atmosphere. In addressing this sensitive issue, you may want to describe your view of the situation and the feelings it triggered in you:

“When you came home from the birthday party last night, I smelled alcohol and cannabis. I was really afraid to see you staggering.”

You could follow up and outline the potential effects of your daughter’s action:

«Drugs can have a strong disinhibitory effect, which means that you could do things under the influence which you would otherwise not do and which you might later regret. Moreover, drugs are not good for your health, they can be addictive and cause brain damage.»

This way you have formulated a complete I-Message. Further information and exercises about I-Messages can be found on [page 6 and 7](#).

How could the conversation continue? You will find more tips for a constructive conversation on [page 10](#).



It is not very useful to force a conversation based on an emotion, as it would probably end up with reproaches and a fight. Similarly, it is not advisable to try to engage your drunk or intoxicated daughter in a conversation. In such a moment, it is best to share your worries with your daughter and to postpone a more in-depth discussion for later on. Send an I-Message (more information on [page 6](#)), which might sound something like this:

«You are in an intoxicated state, and this worries me. However, now is not the time to discuss this.»

Threats, which cannot be implemented (as in this example), or accusations may cause your daughter to become all the more obstinate and to withdraw into herself. Most probably she will not want to talk openly with you.

It is therefore well-worth to wait until the emotions have somewhat subsided to begin a deliberate discussion.

Tips for a constructive conversation can be found on [page 10](#).

I want to find out if Sofia has more of whatever stuff she has taken!



Secret inspections strain a bond of trust which normally exists between parents and children. The need for personal privacy grows especially during puberty, and the searches of your daughter's personal belongings are most likely the cause for her highly resentful reaction. Instead, remain calm even when you find it difficult to do so. Try to find out first if your daughter has indeed taken drugs. Simply ask Sofia directly and confront her with your worries in the form of I-Messages (more information on [page 6](#)).

If your suspicion is confirmed, try to clarify if the drug consumption reflects a juvenile give-it-a-try and testing of boundaries. If that is the case, you should not overreact but explain your position clearly and point out the dangers of drug use.

If Sofia can no longer resist drugs, and if her drug consumption is supposed to help resolve her personal problems, she may be on the road into dependency.

If this were the case, you should seek out a specialist (e.g. a personal physician or a specialist from the local addiction prevention center). Moreover, it is important to convince your daughter of the benefit of such a consultation. It may also be useful to give her an opportunity to talk with a specialist face-to-face.

It is absolutely imperative that you seek professional help if:

- you observe that your children are at risk of becoming criminals,
- accidents occur,
- the school threatens with expulsion,
- the school or the employer insist on treatment.

On [page 10](#) you can find tips/suggestions for a talk about drugs.

I-Messages

Try to frequently send „I-Messages“. In these messages you express your feelings, thoughts and expectations. An effective I-Message consists of three parts:

1. description of the (unacceptable) **behavior**
2. the **feelings** of the parent/ the sender
3. the practical **effect** the child's behavior has on the parent/ the sender

The behavior is what your child does or says. Provide a simple description of the unacceptable behavior. Be careful: do not judge/evaluate, nor interpret this behavior!

In a second step, assess your feelings evoked by this behavior. What are my feelings? You must communicate them frankly. Being honest and not hiding emotions and feelings demands a great effort. This way, your child can understand why this behavior is not acceptable and that it has to change.

Your child must know why his/her behavior is a problem and unacceptable. Likewise, you must communicate the concrete and practical consequences of this behavior. Moreover, this unacceptable behavior causes other negative effects (loss of time or money, more work for you, preventing you from doing other things you like or have to do, etc.).

Remember:

I-Message = behavior + feelings + effect

On the next page you find some tasks to practice your I-Messages!

Practice examples¹

Imagine the following situations. Write down how you would normally react. Then try to find an I-Message with its three parts. Compare your I-Message with your usual reaction. What could the I-Message change in the communication with your child? Compare your I-Message with the suggestions.

- **Children being late**



Your son has gone to school and promised to return straight home at the end of classes. Now he arrives one hour later without calling you.

What would you say? How do you generally react in this situation?

Try to find an effective I-Message:

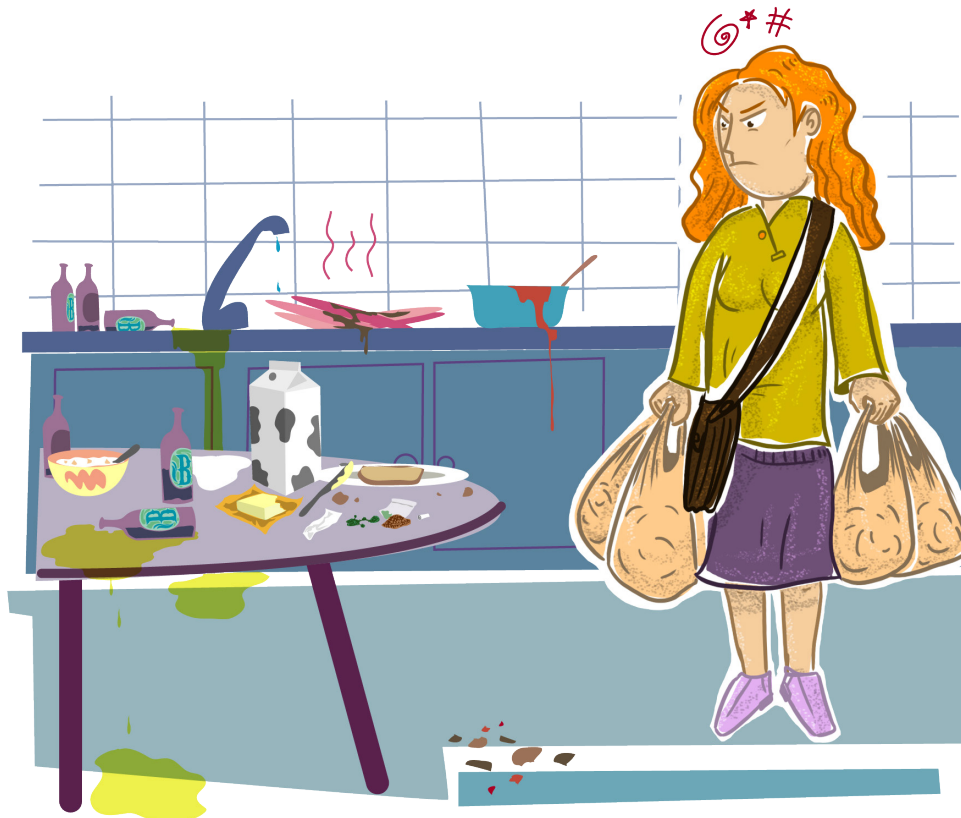
| description (without judgement) of the child's behavior | Your feelings caused by this behavior | Concrete and practical effects of the child's behavior |
|--|--|---|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

Compare with your normal reaction. What could the I-Message change in your conversation with your child?

Possible I-Message:

| description (without judgement) of the child's behavior | Your feelings caused by this behavior | Concrete and practical effects of the child's behavior |
|---|---|---|
| <i>When you arrived late from school, without calling me...</i> | <i>...I was worried about you and what might have happened.</i> | <i>I was so distracted, I couldn't work effectively.</i> |

• Kitchen in a mess



When you come home after shopping and find your kitchen in a big mess, you realize that your children must have just gotten up and failed to clean up after breakfast.

What would you say? How do you normally react in such a situation?

Try to find an effective I-Message:

| description (without judgement) of the child's behavior | Your feelings caused by this behavior | Concrete and practical effects of the child's behavior |
|--|--|---|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

Compare with your normal reaction. What could the I-Message change in the conversation with your child?

Possible I-Message:

| description (without judgement) of the child's behavior | Your feelings caused by this behavior | Concrete and practical effects of the child's behavior |
|---|--|---|
| <i>When I returned home from shopping, I found dirty dishes from your breakfast in the kitchen.</i> | <i>I was disappointed because...</i> | <i>... I had to collect all your dirty dishes and load the dishwasher and lost a lot of time on my free Saturday. I would have preferred reading the newspaper instead.</i> |

Important tips and suggestions for a conversation about drugs

- Deliberately plan and allow for free time to listen to your children and engage in conversation with each other. Try to participate in this way in the life of your children, thus indicating to them: “You are important to me, and it matters to me that you are well and safe.”
- If you suspect that your teenagers consume illegal drugs, arrange for a quiet talk without stress. Consider beforehand which points you want to discuss and what you want to find out.
- If you expect to receive open and honest answers, you should refrain from cornering your teenagers with accusations and full of indignation. Owing to many physical and emotional changes in the lives of teenagers, they already feel insecure and thus react particularly irritably to their own parents' reproaches. It is highly recommendable to communicate with I-Messages (more information on [page 6](#)), whereby you share your own observations and feelings and focus on the effects of their actions.
- Inform and educate yourselves about drug use and its consequences in general, and in particular about the kinds of drugs which your children may (potentially) take. Your own ignorance may only stir up the fears.
- In talking about drugs, you should clearly state your own position and attitude: Drug use can have very harmful effects on your health, particularly the health of teenagers. Under the influence of drugs, one may do things which one would not do in a normal state and which one might later regret.
- Additionally, it is important to clearly recognize and to think about one's own consumption habits. Do not avoid discussions about it and recognize your position as a role model: Set an example: moderate your consumption of alcohol and, if you should be a smoker, refrain from smoking in closed rooms or cars.
- To arrange an agreement with adolescents is far more effective than threats and bluster (e.g. try to agree on a period of abstinence from consumption). Do not expect too much from your teenagers, however. If you obtain information about their consumption habits, that may suffice for the time being.
- Focus your attention in the ensuing conversations not only on drug consumption. In every phase of life, albeit very difficult, there is still something beautiful which connects parents and children.
- Should you be unable to get through to your teenagers and you fear that their drug habits may escalate, you should seek expert help. This could include your personal physician, but also specialists from addiction advice and treatment centers.

„Talking with kids about drugs” is based on the following references:

¹ Gordon, Thomas. 2012. *Familienkonferenz. Die Lösung von Konflikten zwischen Eltern und Kind*. 3. Aufl. München: Heyne, 143 ff

Die Stellen zur Suchtprävention im Kanton Zürich. 2016. *Trinken, Rauchen, Kiffen. Abhängigkeit bei Jugendlichen vermeiden. Tipps für Eltern von 11- bis 16-Jährigen*. Broschüre, 5. überarb. Aufl.

Gordon, Thomas. 2012. *Familienkonferenz. Die Lösung von Konflikten zwischen Eltern und Kind*. 3. Aufl. München: Heyne.

Nolan, Virginia. 2016. «Mein Kind kifft. Was nun?» *Das Schweizer Elternmagazin Fritz und Fränzi*, Februar. retrieved 10.11.2016.

<https://www.fritzundfraenzi.ch/gesundheit/psychologie/mein-kind-kifft-was-nun>